Elaine Brown

A Taste of Power

A Black Woman's Story

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A Taste of Power

Elaine Brown is a former leader of the Black Panther Party, Minister of Information and Chairman. Born in 1943, she was raised in Philadelphia and moved to Los Angeles to pursue a career in the music industry. She joined the Black Panther Party in 1968, and in 1974 was appointed leader of the group, a role she held until 1977. She studied classical piano for many years, and has recorded two albums of original songs, one for Motown Records. She is the author of *A Taste of Power* (1992) and *The Condemnation of Little B: New Age Racism in America* (2002). *A Taste of Power* has been optioned for a feature film with distribution by Netflix.

Elaine Brown is Executive Director of the Michael Lewis Legal Defense Committee, supporting the legal appeal of Lewis ('Little B'). She is also CEO of the non-profit organization Oakland & the World Enterprises, Inc., which is dedicated to launching and sustaining for-profit businesses for cooperative ownership by formerly incarcerated and other people facing extreme barriers to economic survival.

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For Ericka Suzanne Brown

Thank you for your gift of life

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Introduction

This is a chronicle of the life of a black woman-child in America. It is my life.

Reflected here is life as I lived it, my thoughts and feelings as I remember them. Here, too, are my personal exchanges with others. In reconstructing them, I have relied on my knowledge of opinions held, and my recollection of articulated ideas and very specific words in their context.

Memory seems a fragile spirit. It may be a river of reality that gathers dreams and desires and change in its flow. Nevertheless, I have tried to be faithful to both fact and feeling.

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A Taste of Power

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1

Assumption

'I have all the guns and all the money. I can withstand challenge from without and from within. Am I right, Comrade?'

Larry snapped back his answer to my rhetorical question: 'Right on!' His muscular body tilted slightly as he adjusted the .45 automatic pistol under his jacket.

I was standing on the stage, with him at my side. Several of the key Brothers from the security squads were standing just in back of us. To my left I could feel Big Bob, Huey Newton's personal bodyguard, all six feet eight inches and four hundred pounds of him. In front of me, extending all the way to the back of the auditorium, were several hundred other members of the Black Panther Party, a sea of predominantly male faces. They were black men and women from the party's Central Committee and from various local leadership cadres, from the West Side of Chicago, from North Philadelphia, Harlem, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. They had come to Oakland this August of 1974 at my command.

I watched them carefully, noting that no one moved in response to my opening remarks. Here I was, a woman, proclaiming supreme power over the most militant organization in America. It felt natural to me. I had spent the last seven years as a dedicated member of the Black Panther Party, the last four at Huey's right hand.

'I haven't called you together to make threats, Comrades,' I continued. 'I've called this meeting simply to let you know the realities of our situation. The fact is, Comrade Huey is in exile. The other fact is, I'm taking his place until we make it possible for him to return.'

I allowed them a moment to grasp the full meaning of my words.

'I'm telling you this because it's possible some of you may balk at a woman as the leader of the Black Panther Party.' I paused and took a

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deep breath. 'If this is your attitude, you'd better get out of the Black Panther Party. Now.

'I'm saying this also because there may be some individuals in our ranks who have private ambitions and, in Comrade Huey's absence, may imagine themselves capable of some kind of coup.' I paused again. No one spoke.

Cocking my head to the side, I continued in the manner I knew was required. 'If you are such an individual, you'd better *run* – and *fast!* I am, as your chairman, the leader of this party as of this moment. My leadership cannot be challenged. I will lead our party both aboveground and underground. I will lead the party not only in furthering our goals but also in defending the party by any and all means.'

They understood. Two months ago I had been named chairman, making me the second-ranking member of the Central Committee. I was then titularly second only to the minister of defense, who was Huey. The reality was that Huey Newton was the absolute leader of the Black Panther Party. I was now his replacement. They understood.

'Together we are going to move this revolution forward by leaps and bounds, though mindful, of course, that we may have to take one step backward in order to take two steps forward. Specifically, as we had begun to do before Comrade Huey's forced exile, we're going to continue the consolidation of our efforts in one city, *this* city. *Oakland* is the birthplace of this party. Oakland will be the birthplace of revolution in the United States. And that will be so despite the pigs. It will be so despite any petty despots who claim to be our comrades. It will be so despite the criticisms of the infantile leftists, who have accomplished nothing. It will be done despite the voodoo drums of the so-called black nationalists.'

I watched a few of the Brothers slap their palms together in common recognition. A subdued laughter of agreement rippled through the auditorium. I began to walk up and down the stage, purposely emphasizing my words with the sound of the heels of my black leather boots. I punctuated each sentence with a nod to one or another of the soldiers standing on stage with me, backing me up.

'It will be done because they can exile a revolutionary leader but they cannot exile the revolution. We *will* move forward with due speed!

'I repeat, I have control over all the guns and all the money of this party. There will be no external or internal opposition I will not resist

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and put down. I will deal resolutely with anyone or anything that stands in the way. So if you don't like it, if you don't like the fact that I am a woman, if you don't like what we're going to do, here is your chance to leave. You'd better leave because you won't be tolerated!'

I gestured toward Larry. 'Comrade Larry Henson is our new chief of staff. He is my replacement for June Hilliard, who has been expelled. He followed too closely in the footsteps of the former chairman of our party, Bobby Seale. *Don't be afraid of these changes, Comrades*. After all, change is what we seek. As Chairman Mao said, "Let a thousand revolutions bloom!" Change is good. We have to welcome change. Those who resist change will be swept away in the irrelevant dust of history!'

There was a loud chorus of 'Right on!'

'Together we're going to take this city. We will make it a base of revolution. The pigs will look at us and wonder. They will look at us, but they will be unable to deal with us.

'We're going to set a revolutionary example here. And the example we lay down in Oakland will be the spark that lights the prairie fire. We will carry our torch to another city, and then another. Each time, each place, the people will take their lead from us, the revolutionary vanguard. Just as the people have demanded and institutionalized our Free Breakfast for Children and sickle-cell-anemia programs, they will demand socialized medicine and decent housing. Soon they will begin to take control of their local political machinery. Then they will attack the economic structure in each city. Bit by bit, city by city, they will whittle away at the capitalist foundation. Eventually, a time will come – not in our lifetimes, Comrades – but a time *will* come when the people will understand their power and the pigs' machinery will be unable to accommodate their demands. That is when the people, black people and poor white people and oppressed people all over America, will rise up like a mighty tide and wash clean this beachfront of capitalism and racism, and *make* the revolution!'

They began to applaud loudly, then louder, and then suddenly they were standing. The Sisters *and* the Brothers were on their feet. When the ovation was over and they were seated, I released my pent-up breath and continued. 'For now, Comrades, we must take the next step. We *must* make Oakland a base camp for revolution. This is why we can have no internal strife. We have to get moving.

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'Let's get busy, then, Comrades. Return to your chapters and branches throughout this country with renewed dedication. Soon the Central Committee will be issuing orders and reports regarding the status of each chapter. Many of you and your people will be called back to the base.

'Let us get busy and prepare a place for the return of Comrade Huey. Let us get busy and prepare a place for the introduction of revolution!' I raised my fist in the air and shouted: 'All power to the people! Panther power to the vanguard!'

They leaped to their feet, fists raised in salute: 'POWER TO THE PEOPLE! POWER TO THE PEOPLE! POWER TO THE PEOPLE!'

The feelings that washed over me as I spoke were baptismal. There was something in that moment that seemed a reparation for all the rage and pain of my life. Ironically, I had come to it from an abysmal hopelessness, experienced less than two weeks before.

Charles Garry, Huey's attorney, and I had been waiting at the Alameda County jail to take Huey home. Gwen, whom Huey had begun referring to as his wife, to my disgust, was also there, waiting. We were watching Huey. He was pacing up and down the holding cell that occupied a corner of the police processing room. He was restlessly enduring the business of being bailed out. I caught a familiar look of arrogant satisfaction on his face. 'Fuck Callins,' his slight smile said.

Callins was a black tailor who had solicited business from Huey. He wanted to make suits for Huey and certain other Brothers in the party. Callins had, however, refused Huey's request that he discount those suits. Callins had also confronted Huey with his profit problems, and in Huey's own apartment. There had been a bloody fight. Huey had been arrested and charged with pistol-whipping Callins. That had been earlier in the evening. Now we had come to bail Huey out.

While I noted Huey's irreverent attitude about the whole affair, it occurred to me how little I, too, actually cared about Callins. He was neither a man nor a victim to me. I had come to believe everything would balance out in the revolutionary end. I also knew that being concerned about Callins was too costly, particularly in terms of my position in the party. Yes, I thought, fuck Callins.

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On the other hand, I did not feel any urgency about getting Huey released from jail. I needed a rest from him.

To say that I loved Huey, however, even at that moment, would be to say too little. I loved being loved by him. I loved the protection he offered with his powerful arms and fearless dreams. I loved how beautiful he was, sinewy and sultry at once. I loved his genius and his bold uses of it. I loved that he was the vicarious dream of a man that white men hid from themselves, except when he confronted them, their rules, their world. I loved his narrow buttocks and his broad shoulders and his clean skin. I loved being queen in his world, for he had fashioned a new world for those who dared. Yet I had come to hate life with him. His madness had become as full-blown as his genius. The numerous swaggering 'dicks' who had challenged the hero to prove his manhood had finally taken their toll. Now he had outdone them all, including himself.

It was taking an inordinate amount of time for the release process to be completed. Garry and Gwen and I passed the hours with irrelevant chatter and frequent glances at the clock on the wall, which was nearing two in the morning. It was uncharacteristic of the Oakland Police Department to trifle with Huey Newton, even though they had once been considered the most brutal police force in California. That was several years before, however – before Huey's trial for the killing of one of their brothers, Officer Frey. The 'Free Huey' campaign that had erupted on the heels of that charge had dominated the nation's headlines and had devastated the local police. While Huey became a national hero, the Oakland Police Department became a defeated little army.

When Huey was finally released from the holding cell, I watched him stride across the room in all his late-night beauty. As always, I consciously sensed my first surrender to him. I forgot the recent madness remembering other times. The mild growth on his face stung as he embraced me in the same powerful way he always did. He hugged Garry as Gwen put a jacket around his shoulders. I signaled Gwen to go outside to summon Larry and Big Bob, so they could bring Huey's car to the front of the building. That was when the Oakland police demonstrated what had taken them so long.

'Mr Newton, hold it, please,' Captain Something-or-Other said, seeming to emerge from thin air. He had two sidekicks with him. Everybody in the station turned to face him, including the other police.

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Huey glared at the captain, bracing his body for a fight.

Garry stepped forward protectively. 'What do you want? Mr Newton is very tired. He . . .'

'Mr Newton, you are under arrest for a violation of the California Penal Code . . . for the attempted murder of . . . on the night of . . .' the captain stated in 'police-ese.' There was a note lurking in his tone that said this charge was what they had been waiting for ever since Huey had triumphantly slipped from their grasp. The captain's sidekicks clamped handcuffs on the antihero.

The charge concerned the shooting of a seventeen-year-old black girl who was an Oakland streetwalker. She had been shot several days before and was in a coma. The words 'attempted murder' erased the smugness from Huey's face. I thought I saw a flash of genuine terror in his eyes. A few seconds later, he looked overwhelmed by hopelessness. It was just before they returned him to the recesses of the police building. There was a hopelessness hanging in the air, too. None of us knew quite what to do next.

When they finally allowed us to see Huey after he was booked again, the terror was gone. He was back in a holding cell, and back to himself. He had obviously made some instant calculations that he would never ride out the storm that would come from the attempted murder charge. He had, I felt, developed a plan to survive it.

'Raise the bail by morning,' Huey commanded. He was speaking to me quietly but intensely, having pulled me aside.

I sighed, and spoke carefully, '*Tomorrow* morning, not this morning. I can't possibly . . .'

'Tomorrow, then.' He smiled, satisfied. 'Tomorrow we can be in paradise.'

Garry, smelling a protracted legal battle, with its attendant headlines, eased over to the side of the cell where Huey and I were standing. He whispered legal strategies to Huey's faraway glance. Gwen remained stolidly in place, wearing a strained look of sorrow.

I contemplated how only a week before I had been planning to leave the party forever. It was just after Huey had done to me what was commonplace inside our dangerous ranks. He struck me. It was a slap in my face after I had made an innocuous remark. Huey had not so much as raised his voice in anger to me prior to that, not even in

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that last month, when the snares of his madness had left so many others maimed.

We were in his penthouse apartment, where I had gone to tell him something the police-monitored telephone lines should not carry. When I arrived, a Brother was being 'disciplined' on a charge of stealing from the party.

I ignored the bloodied face of the thief, as I had learned to do. I had become hardened to such things, like a Green Beret who learns to think nothing of taking a life: after seeing so many training films on brutal killings, he is no longer repulsed by blood or brutality. I ignored the blood streaming from the nose and mouth of the seated suspect as Huey's security people punished him. I noticed only how cold the apartment was. The cold made me ponder the reason why Huey always kept the windows and sliding glass doors of his twenty-fifth-floor penthouse wide open. Sometimes I had the chilling sense that those open windows and doors meant somebody would be tossed off one of the apartment's many balconies. Recently, it had occurred to me more than once that one day it could be me.

Huey stopped interrogating the thief to talk to me. Typically, he was wearing only a pair of pants, no shirt. His body glistened with the sweat of cocaine abuse. He had probably been up for the last forty-eight hours. His strength shone through, nevertheless, still stunning. Perhaps I loved him too much, I thought.

Before I could tell Huey why I had come, he spoke to me in a sort of stage whisper. 'Elaine, it's important that you go back to your music. I want you to study music seriously. The party will pay for everything.'

His eyes were glazed, and they darted back and forth almost uncontrollably. What he said to me had nothing to do with anything. I tried to hide my bewilderment, my fear.

'Thank you, Huey,' I said anxiously, wanting only to get out of there.

He raised his hand suddenly and smacked me across the face. Then, clenching my jaw with one hand, he pulled me near him with his other, our noses almost touching.

In a careful staccato he said, 'Don't *ever* thank me. When you thank me, it means you are separate from me, not *with* me.'

Within seconds, my mind began to piece together a road map out, away from him and the party. I knew the signals. There had been more

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than enough. I would simply take my daughter, Ericka, to visit with my mother in Los Angeles, as we had done on numerous occasions. We would slip away. Soon, I decided.

It was only a few days later that Callins was beaten up and Huey was arrested. That had bought me a bit of time to think. Now none of it seemed to matter, for everything seemed over.

With a sense of futility, I gathered the cash and collateral from the party's various bank accounts and properties to pay Huey's second, $80,000 bail. When he was released, I met him at the bail bondsman's office, where he had to sign various forms. Gwen was with him, clinging to his arm. He reached out and hugged me warmly, and whispered into my ear: 'Goodbye.'

My eyes closed over tears. I might not ever see him again. His resolve to flee was in his embrace. There was no sound Huey could make or word he could speak or feeling he could harbor that I did not understand in my soul.

He would be silent on the details of his departure, a necessary protection for all of us. He would find refuge beyond the United States. Panthers had already done so – in Cuba, in Algeria. The revolutionary Third World would welcome its famous brother from the belly of the beast. He would surely be taking Gwen, whom I considered his little apolitical strumpet and loyal servant. I blinked away my momentary resentment, conscious that I would never last in the role of Huey's woman. She looked into my eyes, and we smiled at each other. Nobody spoke again.

Huey knew what was required for his survival. Damn the party, the politics, the rhetoric, and the dreaded dependency of everyone, including the 'masses'. He was unburdening himself. He was the parent running away from the child. If he ever returned, he might be forgiven.

For the first few nights after Huey vanished from Oakland, Big Bob, Larry and I spent most of our time trying to figure out how to handle his absence, in the party and in the press. He was scheduled to make a court appearance in the next two weeks. We debated if we could carry off the folly of Father Divine's people, who had for years convinced his flock, and everyone else, that 'Father' was alive though he was really dead. It was during one of those sessions that the whole thing resolved

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itself. Larry, Bob and I were sitting in a booth at the Lamp Post, a bar and restaurant the party operated. A telephone call came for me. I went behind the bar to take it. It was Huey.

'Save my party,' he commanded. His voice was low, but passionate. 'I won't be back. You're the only one who can do it. You are mine. I can't trust anybody else with my party.'

'I can't without serious backup,' I heard myself say, my tongue dry with both fear and excitement. 'You know. The Brothers will never accept it,' I continued, turning away from the patrons on the other side of the bar.

'Let me speak to my man,' Huey said, referring to Big Bob.

'That won't work,' I said quietly, amazing myself with how quickly and emphatically I had responded.

'You decide, then.'

'Larry,' I whispered.

'Is he there?'

'Yes.' I turned and motioned to Larry to come to the bar. I handed him the telephone, indicating who it was. He took it with reverence.

'Yes, sir, Brother,' he said into the telephone.

Then: 'I hear you, Brother. I guarantee it.' Then: 'With my life, Comrade. You have my word.' He handed the telephone back to me.

'Now will you save my party?' Huey whispered.

'Yes.'

It was done. While Huey repaired himself, I would hold and resurrect life from what seemed nearly dead.

As I considered the seriousness of it, I realized I had made the cardinal decision wisely. I needed Larry. 'Politics and war are inseparable in a fascist state,' the beautiful George Jackson had said. We could have no revolution in the fascist state of America without an army. Our army was presently in disarray. Larry was a general.

It was true that Big Bob had been Huey's bodyguard; and in that, his loyalty to Huey was unfaltering. It was also true that Bob had accepted leadership from a woman, Audrea Jones, when he was in the Boston branch. Bob's physical size, however – six feet eight inches and four hundred pounds – combined with his emotional insecurity about it and his lack of self-discipline, made a volatile concoction. He was simply not the stuff of generals.

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In the ensuing week or so, the correctness of my decision was fully borne out. The three of us were constantly together during that time, trying to understand for ourselves the nature of the Black Panther Party that Huey had abandoned.

We decided to postpone the inevitability of holding a general leadership meeting of all our chapters for as long as possible. We had to first shore up the party's operations in Oakland, our national headquarters. Primarily, we concluded, we had to eliminate any potentially negative reaction on the streets to Huey's disappearance. Huey Newton had been an awe-inspiring figure on those streets. News of his absence would create havoc for us.

We began by riding the avenues of Oakland's subcultures every night to inform them that a shift in party leadership would not release them. Homage would still have to be paid. Blacks operating in Oakland – inside or outside the law – knew it was impossible to get around the party. In our revolution, one had, literally, to be part of the solution or part of the problem. No one on the streets of Oakland could withstand being the latter, with or without Huey. That was our nightly message.

We visited a black-owned bar one night and were seated at a table adjacent to one where a notoriously rowdy fellow sat. He immediately launched into a loud conversation among his friends in which he referred to Big Bob as 'fat boy'. Two women at his table started to snicker. Bob stood up. Larry and I also had to stand. Bob walked over to the man and smacked him with the back of his oversized hand, hurling him across the entire room, over tables and glasses of Scotch and vodka on the rocks. The loudmouth's cohorts jumped up as Larry reached under his jacket for his .45 and I reached into my purse for my snub-nosed .38. We were forced to back out of the place like gangsters in a third-rate movie. That was when I knew that Bob was a monumental miasma I could never have restrained.

My decision to place Larry in the recently vacated slot of chief of staff was eventually validated in other ways. I came to realize, for example, that Larry was more respected by the Brothers in the security squads than any of the other men who had been in positions of leadership – including Huey, whom few of them knew at all. Moreover, Larry showed initiative. It seemed he intuitively developed intelligent plans for the systematization, housing, maintenance and care of our

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military inventory, which had been left in disarray since the expulsion of David Hilliard's brother June, the previous chief of staff. Moreover, Larry seemed to know, as much as anyone, including those who had seen combat in Vietnam, how to use the vast array of weapons we found we had.

Every Panther property housed weapons. It was our most basic requirement. Some houses were virtual arsenals. As I began reviewing with Larry and Bob the various operations in the Northern California Bay Area, I was stunned by the magnitude of the party's weaponry.

In Richmond, Berkeley, San Francisco, San Jose, as well as in Oakland and other cities in the area, there were huge stashes. There were literally thousands of weapons. There were large numbers of AR-18 and AR-18-short automatic rifles, .308 scoped rifles, .3030 Winchesters, .375 magnum and other big-game rifles, .30-caliber Garands, M-15s and M-16s and other assorted automatic and semiautomatic rifles, Thompson submachine guns, M-59 Santa Fe Troopers, Boys .55-caliber anti-tank guns, M-60 fully automatic machine guns, innumerable shotguns, and M-79 grenade launchers. There were suitcases, trunkloads, closets full of pistols, such as Astra and Browning 9mms, .45 automatics, .38s, .357 magnums, .41 and .44 magnums. There were boxes and boxes of ammunition, and large supplies of accessories, such as rifle scopes (including some infrareds), silencing devices, tripods, and interchangeable pistol barrels. There were caches of crossbows and arrows, grenades, and miscellaneous explosive materials and devices.

As I watched the adroitness and precision with which Larry organized the Brothers in the security squads to inventory, classify, clean and relocate every single item, I became more convinced than ever that I had made my first and most important decision correctly.

There were other problems, however, that would have to be resolved before we could make the announcement of Huey's exile and my leadership to the general meeting. Most of them centered on the fact that the Black Panther Party had really been Huey's party all along. I had been too close to him to see that before. Even if Bobby Seale or June or David Hilliard or some other Central Committee member dismissed in the last month or so of rage had been there, it would have been irrelevant. Huey alone had known and controlled all the pieces. He had manipulated the party so that no one person knew everything except

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himself. Thus, while Larry inventoried weapons and such, I scrambled to locate and review the party's numerous bank accounts and real property and other records, scattered through our national headquarters office and other party offices and facilities.

Finally, I was forced to contemplate the most serious problem, the probability of internal conflict over my leadership. In that connection, I felt Chicago might present a problem. I knew Los Angeles did.

Southern California, where I had joined the party, no longer had an official chapter of the Black Panther Party. Everything in the area was completely underground. That is, the Panthers there had no overt party affiliation. They lived, for all intents and purposes, like ordinary people. However, they warehoused large arsenals of party weapons, with which they secretly bolstered the enforcement of our political will. The leader of that very tough and loyal sector in Southern California was an arrogant madman, with whom I had had a serious confrontation some time before. On smelling Huey's absence, he drove up to Oakland with three of his men and several of his guns, only a week after Huey left.

Like a buzzard, Steve strutted into the Lamp Post without warning. I watched him from a distance. I watched the absurd show of his men removing his coat, ordering his favorite cognac, and inspecting the other patrons for his security. He was my nightmare.

It had come too soon. I knew it was ultimately inescapable, but the test had come too soon. I had no real idea yet whether Larry was capable of loyalty to my leadership, especially when faced with so formidable a pretender as Steve, a Brother, another man.

As we walked over to Steve's table, I breathed deeply and ordered Larry to follow my lead. Larry would, I hoped, follow through.

'So, the Brother is gone,' Steve said, a smirk on his lips. He lifted his cognac glass to me in a mock toast as Larry and I slid into the booth next to him.

'We want to talk to you alone, Steve,' I said firmly, concealing my trepidation as best I could. I glared at the other L.A. Panthers, who got up.

'Long time, no see, Sister.' He smiled, perfect white teeth glistening. He leaned back into the luxurious red leather of the booth, which matched the bar's deep-pile carpeting.

'What're you doing here?' I said. 'You're not supposed to come here. And you know it. You have to go.'

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'I wanted to find out what was happening, Sister. I heard nobody had seen the Servant since he got bailed out,' he said, referring to Huey.

'That's not the point, *Brother,*' Larry said. 'The comrade just told you you can't be here. Get on up.'

'Huey made me a don, Brother,' he stated with a wave of his hand, as if it held a scepter. 'I have my own operation. *Nobody* tells me what to do.'

It all happened in a flash. Larry reached under his jacket, simultaneously motioning to the other Brothers in the Lamp Post with a nod. Big Bob came over.

Shoving his .45 under the table toward Steve, Larry spit out, 'Naw, *nigger*. You're going to have to be gone. Now! Bury your ass in L.A. Can you dig it?'

'This is bullshit. I want to speak directly to the Servant! Where is he? Or is he really gone?!'

'You're talking to him now, Brother,' Larry said. 'When you talk to the Sister here, you're talking to Huey Newton.'

It could have gotten uglier, but Steve knew. His people knew. Larry had let them know. Steve removed himself and his small entourage from the Lamp Post that night. In a few days, he would slip out of Oakland, back to his underground home in Los Angeles.

That was only part of the madness I had just inherited. The Black Panther Party was the target of the most violent aggression of the police forces of America. Though battered and floundering, it was still breathing fire. It was at once a lion to be tamed and a terrible sword of freedom to be honed. In August 1974, when I assumed leadership, the Black Panther Party was the only armed revolutionary organization operating inside the United States of America.

There were several thousand diehard troops in Oakland and throughout California, and in nearly every state of the Union. There was, of course, our expansive arsenal of weapons, and the clandestine underground operating out of every chapter, Brothers trained in Vietnam and on the wretched streets of America who could and would use violence to carry out our political objectives.

There was nearly a million dollars in our coffers. There was a staggering amount of party-owned real properties, and a massive inventory

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of supplies and vehicles. There was the income from posh parties and ghetto streets, and the new contributions of the working black community, now aligned more strongly than ever with the goals of the party. There were the financial contributions of party members themselves from earned and other income, and revenue from sales of various items produced by the party, including our newspaper.

There was the party's history of daring and power, which had given rise to its nationwide and international support by millions of blacks and other people. There were the hundreds of thousands of people, black people and Latino people and Asian people and white people, who participated in or benefited from our free-food programs, our free medical clinics and legal-aid programs, our prison programs, our school and education programs, our service programs for seniors and teens and abused children and battered women and homeless people. There were the thousands who participated in our Vietnam veterans' and workers' rights projects. There were the thousands throughout the United States who read our weekly newspaper, through individual, school and library subscriptions; and the thousands of others who subscribed to our newspaper outside the United States, in China, North Korea, East Germany, Cuba and elsewhere. There were the numerous Panther support groups formed by whites in the United States and people in Japan, Italy, France, Sweden, Denmark and other countries, even including Israel. There were our numerous coalitions with progressive organizations inside the United States and revolutionary movements throughout the world, particularly in Africa, both north and south of the Sahara.

As I prepared to make my announcement that afternoon when I formally asserted absolute leadership over the party, I recognized that it was an exhilarating madness I had inherited. The Black Panther Party Huey had left in my charge was still a force to be reckoned with. There was no question in my mind that it had to be saved.

As I began to speak to my comrades, I recommitted myself to pushing forward our struggle for the complete freedom of black people in America. I recommitted my life to the party, to fulfill its purpose of introducing socialist revolution in the United States, whether or not Huey returned. I believed with everything in me that it could be done. I believed with everything in me that I could do it.

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2

York Street

My mother used to tell me: 'When I was fifteen or sixteen, I had to walk to school, William Penn High. They called it the "dummies' retreat". Pearl Bailey walked with us. Now she's bigtime. Sometimes after school a bunch of us would go by Pearl's house on the way home, 'cause there were always great big pots of food on the stove there. And I was always hungry . . . My friends would hide their lunches when I'd come into the school cafeteria 'cause they knew I'd ask them for some . . . A lot of the times, when Mama didn't have nothing in the house, I'd go down the street and get the stale bread the baker had thrown out. I'd steal it right out of the bakery trash bins, put water on it, mash it up into dough balls, and eat it . . . I was just like Topsy, you know. I just "growed".'

That was my mother's litany. She performed it nearly every day when I was a girl. She would speak to me matter-of-factly, in run-on sentences, while ironing a pretty dress for me or fixing my hair or washing out my undies.

'And your grandmother, Mama, she could never remember to call me Dorothy. She'd say, "Frances, I mean, Helen, whichever one you are, come over here." Things like that. And Papa, if I'd ask him if we were gonna get some shoes, he'd say, "Need some my damn self" . . . I used to wear shoes with cardboard soles, which I had to keep together with safety pins. . . . Once, when we were coming home from school after stopping at Pearl's house, it started to rain. The rain soaked through the cardboard to my feet, and the cheap dye I had used to cover the fading in my dress began to run down my legs, and everybody laughed at me.'

Such recitations were constant. They traveled with us on the bus or in the subway, or even into our bed at night, where my mother would embrace me tightly. In the silence of our nights, she would summarize her days: 'They treated me like I was nothing. They must think I'm

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nothing. I'm sick and tired of it. I'm sick and tired of everything.' There was a terrible life out there, she warned. Only in our room was it safe; only with her.

Early on, I came to appreciate how right my mother was and to understand that the only way to endure the pain that lay ahead, the only way to survive the misery of life, was to try to eke out a few little victories and never hope for more or dare for more. There was misery not only in being poor but everywhere, in everything.

'You know, Elaine, when I was in my early twenties, I used to hang out with a bunch of musicians and artists. And there was this tough saxophone player, Ted Barnett, that I met one day. He played with all the big bands – like Duke Ellington's, the Count's, all of them.'

'Like the ones that play at the Pearl Theater, Mommy?'

'Yes, like them. And he . . .'

'What's that funny sound the bands make, Mommy?'

'Oh, it's nothing; probably just the horns with those mutes on. But anyway, Ted and I started going out, and after a while we decided we would get married. I was so happy and excited. What a fool I was! Mmmh! About a month before we were supposed to get married – I had bought my wedding dress already – I saw a friend of ours I hadn't seen in a while. "Yeah, Dorothy," he said, "sure is something 'bout Ted. Up and got married last night. Hey, I thought you and Ted had a thing going." '

It was not merely sad or painful to my mother that she had lost her fiancé. What was terrible about it to her was that she had not known better than to have fallen in love. She felt she should have remembered what she always told me: 'Love is a misunderstanding between two fools.'

Life did not seem a terrible affair just because my mother said so. I felt it. I felt it in the very house where I grew up. I felt it outside the house, out on York Street.

York Street was buried in the heart of the black section of North Philadelphia. Its darkness and its smells of industrial dirt and poverty permeated and overwhelmed everything. There were always piles of trash and garbage in the street that never moved except by force of wind, and then only from one side of the street to the other. Overhead utility wires in disrepair ribboned the skyline. Cavernous sewage drains on the street corners spit forth their stench. Soot languished on the

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concrete walkways, on the steps and sides of the houses, and even in the air. Rusted streetcar tracks from another time, a time when people who were alive occupied the territory, ran up and down York Street. And there was the nighttime quiet. As the dark approached each night, houses were sealed tight in fear and York Street became overwhelmed by the quiet, a silent voodoo drum, presaging nightly danger, a gang fight, a stabbing, a fire.

Our house at 2051 was indistinguishable from the other grayish, two-story, brick row houses on York Street. It was squeezed with the others into our block, a block no different in color from the rest of the neighborhood.

I was most terrified, though, inside 2051. My greatest fear lay waiting for me in 'our' room, my mother's and mine. In our room was complete darkness, and the recognition of nothingness, accompanied by the magnified sounds of mice scurrying and hearts beating in fear. Ours was the back room, upstairs. Occupying the other rooms along the upstairs hallway were my grandmother (middle room) and my Aunt Mary (front room). My grandfather slept downstairs, on a divan covered with gray slipcovers; he remained a nebulous figure to me until he died. For me, only three women lived there – and me.

My grandmother was a very light-skinned woman with a white person's facial features and a large bosom. She carried a lot of weight on her short frame and very large feet. She hobbled from the weight when she walked, hobbling and always singing or humming old Baptist hymns learned back in old Virginia and sung now in the First African Baptist Church every Sunday and in our house every single day.

> Be ready when He come
> Be ready when He come
> Be ready when He come
> 'Cause He's comin' again so soon . . .

He was Jesus, my grandmother's protector from the rats and roaches that overran our house. Jesus was her comforter in washing clothes for more than half a century at a scrub board, in cooking meager meals for her nine children, in begging on the street with a cup for money. Jesus insulated her from the insults and blows of my grandfather, to whom

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she clung to the end. Jesus was the balm for her whole life, the life she hated from its beginning as the child of a white man's rape. Yes, Jesus would come someday and deliver her. Jesus would surely come someday, she said.

'He will take you in His arms, if you been good, and carry you up to heaven,' she always told me. 'But if you been bad, Satan's gonna get you and take you to hell, and you'll burn forever.'

'I've been good, Grandma.'

'I know you have, child. But make sure you don't even think an evil thing, 'cause God knows. He'll send the lightning and the thunder. You can't hide from God.'

I used to lie in bed at night next to my mother in the darkness of our room and wonder, if God made me, like my grandmother said, who made God? And if somebody made God, who made the one who made God? I would be hurled to a place, and into a feeling, that terrified me. It was a feeling that I was akin to ether, not made of flesh and bone, as though I had no body. I would bolt up in bed to try to force myself back from that distant place, that feeling of nothingness. I would scream out: *'Mama! Mama! It's that feeling!'*

My Aunt Mary barely spoke, because she barely lived. Living was dangerous. She was a beautiful woman, with smooth skin, the texture of which she attributed to Pond's cold cream, and which was the color of Georgia clay. She wore a tight hairstyle, pressed and oiled, very little makeup, and plain clothes. She was impeccably clean and organized. The inside of the chifforobe in her front room was made of cedar, and she kept her few beautiful, plain clothes on proper hangers inside. She washed all her underwear by hand in Ivory Flakes, placing each item carefully in dresser drawers filled with sachets. Aunt Mary did not seem to worry about God, because she lived too carefully to do wrong or to be noticed by God if she did. She went out only to go to work. Every weekday morning, she walked down the 5 a.m. ugliness of our street with her gabardine coat locked around her body, a cloth scarf wrapped about her hair, lunch bag in hand, off to one more day as a wire clipper on the assembly line at RCA Victor in Camden, New Jersey. She had done that for many years, except for the five or six years between the time she was 'let go' and 'called back' by RCA, during which she 'scrubbed white folks' floors'.

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Mary appeared to be selfish, or maybe just stingy. She was stingy about giving herself over to anything. Whenever she brought home discounted RCA products, such as the new automatic record player that replaced our old Victrola, she placed restrictions on our use of them. Only she, for example, could put records on the machine. Virtually every night we would all gather in the living room to listen to Aunt Mary's Marian Anderson or Harry Belafonte or Eartha Kitt records. At the same time, my grandmother would voraciously read the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the colored people's newspaper, making comments to no one in particular about the achievements and machinations of our race.

'And you see this picture here. Look, Frances – I mean, Dorothy,' my grandmother would mumble, without looking up.

My mother would ignore her and sing along with Eartha Kitt: 'Santa Baby, I forgot to mention one little thing – a ring.'

'Elaine, child, come here. You see this picture. This is Kwame Nkrumah. You know, he's been to this very house. He used to play saxophone with Frances's husband, John. They went to Lincoln University together. Now he's back in Africa, fighting for . . . Lord, colored people sure is killing each other. You see this here. Two boys got stabbed last week. Mary, Mary! Look! One of them was named Lonnie Washington. I wonder, was that Mrs Washington's boy? It was only two blocks from here . . . Well, well, well. Mr DeBerry – you know him – he died. Sure was a fine man. Used to work two jobs to take care of his wife.' And she would read on, bits and pieces, flipping through the *Courier*'s pages of orange and black print, though nobody really listened.

And there was my mother. The image I had of my mother in those York Street years was of a strong, protective being. Much of her strength was manifested in heavy hands and muscular arms. In general, I thought of my mother as plain, not in an unassuming fashion, but in an unimportant sense. She spent her time on me, doting on me, fixing me up, my hair, my clothes, my shoes; making sure I always looked 'right'. She would always tell me how beautiful I was, 'the most beautiful girl in the world'. I was not like the other little colored girls in our neighborhood, she told me. They had skin that was too dark and facial features that were too African and hair that was not 'good' like mine.

My mother would escort me to the bathroom at night so that she

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could keep the scampering roaches from my feet as they ran for cover when the light was turned on. She bathed me, often in Alaga starch, because my skin was delicate, making sure I was washed thoroughly, especially my private parts. She would curl my hair like Shirley Temple's for Sunday school and press my dresses in the evenings. She bought secret food for me, to save me from the torture of my grandmother's haphazard cooking, making sure I did not have to eat anything I did not want – like the possums my half-Indian grandfather would slay in homage to some tradition, or the ugly fish he would catch and bring home wrapped in newspaper, or the 'chitlin' ' dinners that were cooked in our house and sold to make money.

We would go to sleep at night, my mother and I, in our back room, and she would hold me and stroke my 'beautiful hair' like a lover. She would often read me stories, helping me shut out the eerie sound of the rodent feet scraping the other side of the salmon-colored flowers on the wallpaper that covered our room. She would press me close and remind me that she was the only one who would protect me from the regular assaults of life, from all those who were out to do her and me no good, which seemed to include everyone. A woman who was 'nothing' wrapped her strong arms about my skinniness and protected me from unknown, deadly beasts. When she held me, her large breasts were comforting, and sometimes sensual. We were one against the world, she told me, as she recalled her dream to me.

I used to dream – it was before you were born, while I was carrying you – that I had a little girl. The girl in that dream looked just like you. She was about five years old. We were in a garden. And she had on a little apron which was filled with apples. She would come toward me, offering me the apples, saying, 'I came to help you, Mommy.'

When I was old enough to walk and talk, my mother sent me to a nursery school operated by the Red Feather charity agency. She worked all day pressing clothes, doing 'piece work'. They made girls' dresses where she worked, and she would press some and also steal some for me, so I would always look pretty.

Once, I visited her 'atwork' – that one-word locale for which my mother left me each weekday. It was Christmastime. She held my hand and guided me through rows of sewing machines and cutting boards. She proudly displayed me, her beautiful product. Bits and pieces of

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cloth and string littered the floors, and it seemed everyone was bending over something or other, unattentive to me or the colored lights of Christmas strewn along the huge pillars that supported the room, which appeared to be the size of an entire square block.

I was surprised when my mother showed me her work area. It was just a big ironing table. I watched her wrap a scarf around her head, covering her hair and forehead. That was to keep the sweat from her eyes, she said. She found her place among what seemed dozens of other black and Puerto Rican women, pressers, who lined the walls of Rosenau's in a row, all wearing head rags, all with their own jugs of ice water sitting on their ironing boards to keep their lungs clean and their bodies from dehydrating. A Puerto Rican named Yolanda had dropped dead at her board no more than a month before, my mother told me. TB, they had said. She was only twenty-six. It seemed over a hundred degrees in there even though it was wintertime.

I watched my mother work. She slammed a hot iron onto a cotton thing of ice-cream colors, and within seconds, a little girl's dress evolved, bearing the 'Cinderella' label. She folded the dress and boxed it for shipping to a retail store. She was paid 25 cents for each dozen dresses she pressed, folded and boxed, she told me. All the ladies in the row were hollering back and forth to each other, while their ironing boards squeaked in accompaniment to the rhythm their tough hands made as they, too, slammed down hot irons, driving them back and forth to make their quotas and more. 'Chile, hand me that box . . . Dottie, I'm up to fifteen dresses. Girl, whatchu say . . . Bitch, get your hand out that bin till I get my batch.' By the time we left, I felt like crying. I was not sure why.

Since my mother believed I was too precious for either of the public schools in our neighborhood, when I finished nursery school, she signed me up for an experimental elementary school which accepted only 'exceptional' children. Besides, the boiler had blown up at nearby Claghorn Elementary, causing nearly one hundred kids to be scalded; and like the other neighborhood school, it had only half-day classes, with sixty kids to a class.

There was a four-year waiting list for the special school. My mother determined, however, that I would go there right away; there would be no waiting list for me. She fired off letters to the school board and made

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personal appearances at its meetings. She sought out and got support for her cause from locally prominent colored people. Nearly every day, she would call every colored professional she knew of, including our neighborhood doctor, the funeral home director, and the minister at Jones Tabernacle A.M.E. Church. She would implore them to understand how hard it was for an ordinary working woman like herself to provide anything decent for her child, how hard it was for her to even keep her head above water as a woman alone, and how she really needed their assistance as men of importance. One by one they were pressed into service to call or write the school board in support of my attendance at the school. When she was finished, I was enrolled in the kindergarten class of Thaddeus Stevens School of Practice, right on schedule.

Thirteenth and Spring Garden Street was a strange location for a special school. It was an abandoned, semi-industrial area that bordered downtown Philadelphia. Most of the people who remained when the small factories closed for the evening were Puerto Ricans and gypsies. When I first approached the old gray façade of Thaddeus Stevens, I thought it was a church or perhaps some kind of castle. It was, however, an experimental school for children who were considered very smart. Reading and writing, addition and subtraction, were taught in kindergarten, and all the classes were very small. Most of the children were white, and nobody in the school lived in the neighborhood, except the very few Puerto Ricans.

My kindergarten class of about fifteen was typical. Most of my classmates were white; Jewish, actually. There was one Puerto Rican, two other colored kids, and one Chinese girl. We would sing:

> I am a good American.
> What do you have to be?
> I am a good American.
> Just take a look at me . . .

I liked my class and the songs we sang. I liked our drawings and printed letters pasted on the walls in exhibition of our prodigiousness. I liked the games we played, the naps we took, and our afternoon treat of graham crackers and milk. I became a happy person and forgot the dark

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feelings of 2051 West York Street for those seven or so hours at Thaddeus Stevens. I forgot, until I noticed a little thing that cast a small shadow on my new life. My lunch bag was different from the other kids'. Mine was a used brown bag from Max's grocery store 'up the street', at the corner of 21st and York. It had grease marks on it and numbers written on the side. Some of the numbers were Max's grocery configurations; some were my mother's 'numbers' figures.

Every day, including Saturday but not Sunday, my mother played the numbers, a kind of lottery run by Philadelphia's organized criminal syndicate. I used to listen to her on the telephone in the evening.

'Yeah, Ethel, I had the first digit. I had dreamt a 2. I knew fish was 238, but I didn't like a 3 or an 8, even though I dreamt about a fish.'

Turning to me: 'Elaine, did you dream anything last night?'

'I dreamt about a pig, Mommy.'

'A pig? What was he doing?'

'He was gruntin'.'

She would look up my dream in *Prince Zolar's Number Book* (the back inside cover of which was inscribed, 'Colored People of the world, unite!').

'Pig is 554,' she would say into the telephone, scanning the book, 'but a gruntin' pig is 617. Still, I like a double for tomorrow. I'm gonna call that nigger and tell him to box 554 for me for a nickel. I like it.'

Her hands would hang up the old black dial telephone receiver, with its matted cord, which sat on a table against a wall in our dining room. She would dial the number runner's house and tell him the combinations to play for her the next day. Then she would pick up her school-lined notebook and enter another day's figures into it. There had to be a pattern, and she would find it. She would hit the number one day, she told me. Big, too. She had years of numbers in a collection of those books. She would then compare her number with the predictions on Lady Dale's Number Card. Finally, she would rub some of Lady Dale's Money Drawing Oil on her strong brown hands.

Whenever she had a 'thought', or somebody died or was born or went into the hospital, or something unusual occurred, or she had a vivid dream, my mother would find a three-digit number associated with it. She would jot down that number on the first piece of paper she found, including on Max's bags that carried my lunch to school.

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The other kids had neatly tucked, clean paper bags. I wondered: Didn't their mothers play the numbers? Their sandwiches were different, too, wrapped in cellophane, brand-new and shiny, unlike mine, often wrapped in used waxed paper. But my sandwiches came with the crusts cut off because I hated bread crusts. And I had Welch's grape juice in my thermos instead of that rotten milk. It all began to balance out again, until I went to Barbara Keesal's house.

In the early fall of our second-grade school year, after the celebration of the Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, for which our school was necessarily closed, Barbara Keesal invited me to her Halloween party. Barbara was a chubby Jewish girl who seemed to have everything: a perfect red coat, perfect leggings and boots, a perfect lunch box, perfect dresses, and perfect barrettes for her hair. I was thrilled to be invited to her party.

When my mother delivered me to Barbara's door, which was opened by a uniformed maid, many of the other kids were already there. There were rabbits, ghosts, pirates, dancing girls, and now me, a gypsy. We sat at a long table covered with Halloween-motif tablecloth and napkins and laden with lots of party favors and a bounty of candy corn, apples, cider and potato chips. More food was served to us by yet another maid. There was carpeting on the floors, and there was a huge chandelier which twinkled on our happy occasion. We laughed and laughed and played games and were told scary stories. When I left Barbara Keesal's party, I was actually frightened, frightened to go back to 2051 West York Street.

My mother latched the old brown door at 2051 behind us, closing out the cold October air. Our lungs were immediately filled with escaping coal gas, the blue haze of which enveloped us. As she guided me through the vestibule, I finally saw the darkness which she constantly complained about. The twenty-five-watt bulbs could not begin to illuminate our house. I saw how ugly it was, its squeaky floors covered with cheap linoleum. As we approached the stairs to go up to our room, I remembered how I had fallen down those stairs a year before and knocked out my front teeth.

My mother made me wait at the bottom of the stairwell while she went into the kitchen to get us a drink of water. I did not want cocoa, because I did not want to wait there alone too long, and I certainly

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never entered the kitchen at night. I dared a peek at my old grandfather sleeping lifelessly on his divan in the adjacent living room. He looked just like a picture of Satan, with his jutting jaw and sharp nose and skeletal body. I could hear my mother rinsing the roach wings from our glasses. I could hear her opening the door to the icebox, the dripping of its icy water into the pan beneath it echoing through the dining room and into the hall where I stood frozen. Now she was closing the door to the shed kitchen, that cold and damp little appendage to our house through which one might exit to a concrete plot called our back yard. I could hear my mother walk past the monstrous wood-burning stove, which always appeared on the verge of collapse from the grease that corroded it or was stuck in a Crisco can on top of it. She was returning, passing the terrible cellar door that always challenged me to look at it or open it or go beyond it, down weak wooden stairs to a cement tomb where rats played in the coal bin and left their droppings on an old baby crib and other relics I had looked at only once.

Why couldn't I live with Barbara Keesal! At least at night.

I tried to stay away from York Street as much as I could after that. I began to spend most of my after-school hours at the home of another Jewish classmate, Arlene Lander. Arlene, like Barbara, was chubby; and because my mother always worried about how skinny I was – for which she forced cod-liver-oil tablets down my throat every morning – I concluded that that was how rich Jewish girls were supposed to be.

Arlene and I would enter her home through her father's store, Lander's Shoes, located in a mostly Jewish neighborhood on the fringes of North Philadelphia. Arlene's father or mother would greet us girls, on our way up to their apartment above the store, with balloons or some other trinket they had on hand in connection with a shoe sale. I would look at all the shoes on the racks and fantasize about how Arlene could have a new pair of shoes every day if she wanted.

Like Barbara Keesal's house, Arlene's apartment was very bright and had carpeting throughout. There were mirrored walls and soft couches and chairs everywhere. Arlene even had her own bedroom. The first thing we would do was head for the kitchen to make snacks for ourselves, even though a housekeeper was there most of the time and Arlene's grandmother was there all the time. Arlene's kitchen was bright and big, and had a refrigerator and no icebox; it also had a gas

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oven and an electric mixer and an assortment of other fancy automatic things. We would usually make kosher salami or grilled cheese-and-tomato sandwiches. We would get soft drinks from one of the cases stored in a big closet in the kitchen, fill our glasses with ice cubes from her freezer, and take trays back to Arlene's room, where there was a television set.

Arlene's grandmother would usually come into Arlene's room to visit us. She was a short woman whose hair was bluish-white like my grandmother's. Her nails were always polished, and her wrist was branded with a line of dark and faded numbers. We might be watching the *Howdy Doody* show or something on Arlene's television when her grandmother came in, inevitably pinching my cheeks with her withered hand. She would proclaim, in her broken English, that I had such a *shayne punim*, and how much I looked just like a little Sabra.

My visits to Arlene's house extended the time between the lightness of Thaddeus Stevens and the weight of York Street. I was elevated with happiness each moment I spent with her and her family, no matter my confusion over their strange Jewish ways; reflected, for example, in the time Arlene's grandmother screamed at her and me after we mixed the *milchikeh* with the *flaishikeh*, or the milk with the meat dishes. Arlene and I had washed the plates on which we had earlier had grilled-cheese sandwiches. In Yiddish, Arlene's grandmother cried out that we had put our plates into the wrong kitchen cabinet. It was a violation of Jewish dietary laws that could be corrected, it seemed, only if the tainted plates were destroyed. Following Arlene's lead, I took my dish from the cabinet and smashed it on the floor.

Otherwise, I felt a sense of well-being at Arlene's, content in the traditions of her Jewish home and with my momentary immersion in the life of a people who lived so well. Jewish life was a good life, I decided, now eagerly making dreidels for Hanukkah or lighting the holiday menorah at school, or sitting down to dinner with increasing frequency at Arlene's. Despite my being a *shiksa* (a non-Jewish girl), as well as a *shvartzer* (a colored girl), I ate dinner there even on Shabbat, the traditional Sabbath holiday usually restricted to family or other Orthodox Jews. With the greatest feeling of pride, I would solemnly wait for Arlene's father to don his yarmulke and prayer shawl, as the sun set on Friday evenings, and light the candles on their dinner table. Before we

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ate, he would bless the challah bread and the other food, pour glasses of Mogen David wine, and keep the faith of their fathers.

Sometime during that period, terrifying thoughts about God began to overtake my nights. I truly believed in God and I prayed. Now, however, I was beginning to wonder more and more who that giant being really was who controlled life. Where was He? How did He decide who lived where and who did what on His earth? My night-time fits of anxiety became more and more frequent.

Mama, Mama! It's that feeling!

Now, every night, my mother would leap to turn on the lights when I called out and hold me fast until I stopped shaking. Now, every night, I really needed my mother to hold me, as she had always done. She would protect me forever, I tried to believe, as she lay there half awake to listen to me breathe, to listen to whether I was breathing. Soon, however, I began to feel that only daylight could deliver me.

Morning allowed me to escape, up 21st Street to Susquehanna Avenue, to take the bus along 'Susque' to Broad Street. Escaping, I would glance out the bus windows to see the candle and trinket stores, the fish markets, and the meat markets with pigs' feet hanging in their windows, the winos still sleeping from the night before. To me, it was a bus ride through a tunnel of desolation.

Most of the time, my mother would take me; sometimes, Aunt Mary. By the third grade, I had to make the daily trek alone.

Alone now, I had also to face the real tunnel, the tunnel of fears that lay at the bottom of the open mouth of the subway entrance of the Susquehanna and Broad subway station. *Yellow-tiled. You'll be getting on at yellow*. Darkness and danger were down there. There was no place to hide there, and no one to hold me. The terrible, multicolored monster-face I always dreamed of lurked down there. I could be swallowed up and hurled around in the darkness down there. Stealthily, I had to walk down the steps, covered with old chewing gum and spit and trash and North Philly soot, to the turnstile to deposit my token, hoping each day the train would come before death did. People got pushed onto the tracks. There were gang fights underground. Urine spotted the walls and permeated the underground tunnel air, making me nauseous. There were strange men who leaned in corners; I had seen one looking at me once while he masturbated. I learned to stand quietly, Aunt Mary

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style, immobile, feeling I might survive if no one noticed me, with my curly locks and stolen Cinderella dresses.

When the train finally came, I would stand inside, very still, rigid, holding the rail tightly until the train pulled into the Spring Garden station. *Blue-tiled. You get off at blue.* Finally, I could emerge into daylight and seek the familiar warmth of the old gray bricks that formed Thaddeus Stevens School of Practice. I could breathe again, relax, find my seat by the windows, let the sunlight filter through me and daydream aimlessly.

I grew to hate to leave school, no matter the sweet delays at Arlene's. I hated going back to York Street. Our back room was not safe. If my mother could not escape the horrors she told me about, and those that I now saw and sensed myself, she could not protect me and I could never help her. *I came to help you, Mommy.* It was safe only at the Thaddeus Stevens School of Practice. Decent people were there; not just Barbara Keesal or Arlene Lander, but my teachers, who took me to lovely places in their literature and in their music. Mr Silver was teaching me to read and appreciate poetry.

> The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
> And the highwayman came riding –
> Riding – riding –
> The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.

And I learned Irish melodies in Mrs McCullough's cheery classroom.

> When Irish eyes are smilin'
> Sure it's like the morning dew.

There seemed to be a promise at Thaddeus Stevens. It was not in the victory of hitting a number. It was not in the success of stealing a new dress from a dress factory. It was not in a decent piece of meat for dinner or in songs played over a new RCA Victor record player. It was bigger than my mother's arms. It was a promise with wings that would lift me away from York Street forever and plant me in the security of a white world. I saw that promise and knew I had to join those white people.

I could do it, too, I felt. I would simply have to pay close attention to

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them. I would have to become more like them. They would begin to see me as one of them, and welcome me into their world.

I became a biddable little wretch. I did anything to belong among them, those white children and white teachers. I was the first to offer to beat overchalked erasers or run messages around the school, or answer a question, or clean up after a class party. I jumped at a chance to trade or give away my lunch treats, my Tastykakes or my Welch's grape juice, to my school friends. Soon I was convinced I was actually beginning to join them, leaving York Street behind. It was my secret.

Now I was a colored girl only on York Street, my mother's sweet little colored daughter who had come to help her. But I was fooling her and everybody on York Street. I was fooling everybody, because I was not really colored anymore.

'You know, Elaine, you're not like the other coloreds. You're different. You don't even look like one.' My white friends and teachers at Thaddeus Stevens were telling me that all the time.

Eventually, I discovered that my ultimate disguise could be manipulated through words, their words in their voices. I listened to them, paid attention to their grammar, their syntax, their cadence. I learned to speak exactly like white people, learned to enunciate their language, to say '*th*ese' and not '*d*ese,' and 'he'll be going' rather than 'he be goin' '.

Finally, I became white. At least until 2.17 p.m., when school was let out, when the bell would toll and the curtain fall and I would be returned by fate through the subway tunnel, down Susquehanna, down 21st Street to 2051 West York Street, and back to being black.

> If you white, you right
> If you yellow, you mellow
> If you brown, stick around
> If you black, git back
> Way back!

Everyone on York Street knew the truth of that rhyme. Everyone understood. Everyone had always known that dark-skinned colored girls with 'bad', or kinky, hair were ugly. Everyone had always known that 'high-yellow' colored girls with 'good', or straight, hair were pretty.

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The rule was simple: The closer to white, the better. We derided girls who had short 'nappy' hair, or thick 'liver' lips, or protruding, high behinds, or skin 'so black it's blue'.

I did not want to get back. Despite that I was, like most girls on York Street, a few shades 'too dark', I had 'good' hair and white facial features. I was really not like the other colored girls. My mother had told me that. White people were telling me that. I did not belong on York Street. I belonged in their world. I had not only learned to talk white and act white, I could do white things.

I could play classical music. I had started taking piano lessons after my mother read a series of child-rearing books and decided I needed to be well rounded. Every Wednesday after school, from the time I was about six or seven years old, I took a private piano lesson. In my turn I sat in Mrs Campbell's living room to learn scales and numerous ditties and other pieces, and to complete each year's John Thompson piano book.

All of Mrs Campbell's other students were considered 'siddity' little colored children. That is, they were all not only lightskinned, they lived in Germantown, a very 'nice' section of Philadelphia where refined colored people had broken the color line. All the fathers of the other children seemed to be doctors or lawyers. All their mothers were either teachers or, better, housewives. All the boys had names like that uppity, blond-haired Laddie Avery; and all the girls looked like the famous Dr Simpson's fair-skinned, straight-haired daughter, Betsy. Although I seemed to be the only one of Mrs Campbell's students who lived in a 'bad' neighborhood, I did not mind. In the end, despite the other students' self-serving inquiries as to where I lived – which they already knew – or who my father was – which nobody seemed to know – or what my mother did for a living – which I refused to tell them – despite everything, I was learning to play European classical piano. Eventually, I even became a featured soloist at Mrs Campbell's annual spring recitals. I could play Beethoven and Chopin and even Liszt.

There were other white things in my repertoire. I was learning ballet. When I started studying piano, I also began taking ballet lessons. My mother would wake me early Saturday mornings during the school year to take me downtown to the Sydney School of Dance, where I would spend several wonderful hours away from York Street. I was happy at Miss Sydney's. A joyful spirit seemed to live among the bars

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and mirrors and smooth wooden dance floors. Unlike Mrs Campbell, Sydney King catered to all kinds of little colored kids – mostly girls – from all over Philadelphia, from good neighborhoods and bad ones, who were both dark-complexioned and light. I even loved Miss Sydney's when my mother bought me a foot-long hot dog and a grape soda at our break. There was, of course, the magnificent pleasure of the ballet itself. At the Sydney King early-summer recitals I was transformed into a blue jay and danced to the 'Waltz of the Hours', or I danced in sequined splendor in the children's *corps de ballet*, with pink tights and a pink tulle skirt. I even learned to dance on toe.

Moreover, there were my theater excursions. Once a month, after my Saturday ballet lesson, my mother would carry me off to the Academy of Music to see a play performed by the Mae Desmond Children's Theatre Troupe.

Everything considered, I believed I was really becoming white. So much of my life was white, except when I was returned to York Street and somebody like Mary Alice, who lived down the street, snidely 'signified' at me, coming home from school or a ballet lesson.

'Look at her!' Mary Alice might whisper loudly to her cronies as I passed by. 'She must think she cute. She ain't poot.'

I would have to go inside 2051 to change into my black jeans and white bucks and go back out into the street. I would fetch Barbara and Nita, with whom I was best friends forever when I returned to York Street. We did everything together, played the same games, wore the same outfits, and remained the skinniest girls on our block. By fourth grade, Barbara had started attending Thaddeus Stevens, though I felt she was still not really like me, just as Nita was not. Nevertheless, we were inseparable. Barbara lived at 2057 and Nita lived next door to me at 2049 West York Street. I would get Barbara and Nita, and they would put on their black jeans and white bucks, and we would walk down the street three abreast, so nobody could come between us. We might walk right in front of Mary Alice's house, chanting:

> I ain't gon' talk about your mama,
> She's a sweet ole soul.
> She got a ten-ton pussy
> And a rubber asshole.

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York Street threw me back, back to the realization that I might not ever really be white. I *would* have to get back. I saw that every time I returned.

When summer rolled around, I lived in turmoil. I had to be on York Street every day, poor and black all day, every day.

In the summers of my preteen years, 'me, Barbara and Nita' – Barbara, Anita and I in Thaddeus Stevens winters – would go every weekday morning to Vacation Bible School. Replacing Chopin, the ballet, the theater, and Thaddeus Stevens was Bible School. We would sit in the Sunday-school section of Jones Tabernacle A.M.E. Church to learn our Bible lessons. They were parables of Jesus, typed out onto glossy, colored 3 x 5's, as captions to pictures of Jesus, whose hair was long and blond, whose face was white, who wore sandals and a robe and was usually depicted sitting among his flock of white children. Jesus, we learned, could do everything. He could walk on water, raise the dead, and never die.

Jesus loves me, this I know,
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to Him belong.
We are weak, but He is strong.

After those lessons, we would eat peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches and drink lemonade. Then Barbara, Nita and I would walk back home in the afternoon, synchronously stepping military style:

We are rough!
We are tough!
We are the girls
Who don't take no stuff!

After we arrived home, we would play out on York Street all those hot days. First, we might jump rope double-dutch. Then there would be hand-clapping games. We would form a circle with some of the other girls on the block and begin by clapping our hands back and forth to each other and shaking our little girlish hips in time to our chants:

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Mama in the kitchen,
Papa in jail,
Baby 'round the corner
Hollerin' 'pussy for sale.'

Or:

Wild Bill Hickock was a peaceable man,
He peed out the window on a bald-headed man.
He came down the steps with his dick in his hand
And said, 'Hold it, motherfucker,
I'm a peaceable man.'

When the setting summer sun announced the end of one more long day on York Street, I felt that I had survived one more nodal point in the demoralizing cycle. Our mothers would call out to us to come inside, to make the valiant attempt at washing away the North Philly dirt that the summer humidity had ground into our skin. We might, just before leaving each other for the night, do one more round of 'Hambone'. Patting our feet to establish the rhythm, we would slap our chests and knees with our hands, in accompaniment:

Hambone, Hambone, where you been?
'Round the corner, back again.
Hambone, Hambone, what you see?
Two black niggers lookin' at me.

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